

Contributions to language from implicit and explicit memory.

A fundamental distinction in human cognition is between implicit cognitive mechanisms, which operate outside of conscious awareness, and explicit cognitive mechanisms, which require awareness in their operation. In this talk, I will address how these two fundamentally different mechanisms contribute to language. By primarily drawing on EEG/ERP evidence, I will show that some but not all aspects of language: (1) are processed outside of awareness; (2) can be acquired by adult second language learners unintentionally and implicitly; and (3) are influenced and enhanced by memory processes occurring during sleep. Taken together, these results show that many of the mechanisms that support language processing and acquisition—as well as learning more generally—operate “beneath the surface” and outside of our conscious awareness. This research has important implications for understanding why language acquisition and many other types of learning become so much more effortful later in life. Given that some types of learning may occur unintentionally or without focused attention, a related goal is to identify optimal learning conditions for language, particularly for adult non-native learners.